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USE HISTORY IN A POPULIST ERA?

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Trump and the Protestants

How Does the Religious Right and Left Use History in a Populist Era?

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There is “a certain legendary fog that most heroes give off and that always veils the truth for a more or less lengthy period of time.” So Victor Hugo wrote of Napoleon in *Les Misérables*. Working against the emperor’s image is a ‘pitiless’ and ‘bright light’ — history.

“What is strange and divine about it is that, completely luminous as it is, and precisely because it is light, it often cast shadows where there used to be rays of sunlight; it makes two different phantoms of the same man, and one attacks the other and proves him false, and the darkness of the despot does battle with the dazzling splendor of the captain. This allows a truer measure in the final evaluation of the peoples of the world. Babylon sacked diminished Alexander; Rome in chains diminishes Caesar; Jerusalem massacred diminishes Titus. Tyranny dogs the tyrant. It is a sorry thing for a man to leave behind him a pall that his shape.”¹

American Indians dispossessed diminished the Puritans; African Americans enslaved diminished George Washington; racial superiority diminished Abraham Lincoln; eugenics diminished Margaret Sanger. Centuries of racism, sexism and exploitation diminished American greatness—if a ‘great’

America ever existed.

The United States is in the midst of a historical reckoning. For many on the far Left, only the abhorrent pall remains. For many on the far Right, the glorious man still lies underneath (and it is usually a white Christian man). Caught in the middle are, I suspect, the majority of Americans who show deep appreciation for their deeply-flawed nation. The loudest voices on both sides tell these Americans that they must choose between the detestable and culpable nation or the innocent and glorious one. The monument to American greatness must fall or stand.

AMERICA'S FUTURE AND THE STRUGGLE FOR ITS PAST

American history is a foreign country. The Left and Right both vacation there, but they do not like bumping into each other on the beach. The re-election campaign of one of America's most controversial Presidents coincided with the 400th anniversary of one of America's most controversial events—the Pilgrims arrival at Plymouth. The Pilgrims, like the presidential candidates, are celebrated and confronted, deified and demonised. Although history is important to any election, it played an outsized role in 2020. Both sides waged a proxy war in the past.

Trump's 2016 and 2020 campaigns promised to restore American greatness. In his July 2020 Mount Rushmore speech, the President positioned himself as the defender of history against an armed band of intolerant historical revisionists. America was poisoning itself with historical criticism. In denigrating the past, the Left drove Americans from the mental homeland that undergirded comfort, community and civic pride. He argued that their lack of pride in history prevented Americans from striving for greatness. Trump—who is no stranger to grandiose claims—made a particularly controversial one in the final debate: “Nobody has done more for the black community than Donald Trump. And if you look, with the exception of Abraham Lincoln, possible exception, but the exception of Abraham Lincoln, nobody has done what I've done.” He claimed to be ‘the least racist person in this room’ and cited criminal justice reform, Opportunity Zones, investments in Historically Black Colleges and Universities and employment rates.

In response to Trump's record on race over the last four years, many worried that his restoration plans involved revivifying white supremacy. History proved particularly controversial in the 2020 campaign after the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis. Since then, monuments across the country have been protested, disfigured, toppled or removed. The Right focused on the violence, rioting and looting and argued that the Left allowed intolerant zealotry to destroy civility and society. The Left interpreted Trump's Mount Rushmore speech as a jingoistic and nationalistic trip down memory lane to an America that never existed. Further, it took place in the context of historical protests that were also protests of history—yet Trump never mentioned police brutality and only dwelt on the

good in America's past. In the face of riots over injustice, Trump extolled the power of positive history. In other words, America was great because it removed the knee from the slave's neck, not wicked because it knelt over the slave for centuries.

Biden could not let Trump's Lincoln comment pass unremarked: "Abraham Lincoln here [i.e. Trump] is one of the most racist presidents we've had in modern history, he pours fuel on every single racist fire, every single one."² What Biden did not mention was the fact that the historical Lincoln was simultaneously the great emancipator and an unapologetic racist. He wanted freedom for Blacks, but not equality with them. Trump, like Lincoln, could have better policies for minorities and also be a racist—the two need not be mutually exclusive. The rising numbers of minorities who voted for Trump in 2020 suggests that some prefer his policies even though he might be verbally offensive.

AMERICAN PROTESTANTS AND AMERICAN HISTORY

The contest for America's future is a struggle over its past. Because Americans lack a shared memory, increased historical reflection contributes to polarisation. Both sides claim to defend justice and equality. However, their incompatible histories present an obstacle to both. Rival conceptions of justice pair with competing interpretations of history—and the combination can prove toxic for public discourse.³ When theological differences are added, this further complicates matters. *Trump and the Protestant Reaction to Make America Great Again* (Routledge, 2020) explores how the common grounds around Christianity, history and politics can become battlegrounds when Americans weaponise the ties that bind.

In order to illustrate competing and incompatible historical memories, I explored responses to Donald Trump and his vision to restore American greatness. His 2016 campaign slogan wrapped a historical claim about national decline around a vision of progress. America was great, and Trump would 'Make America Great Again' (MAGA). This slogan inspired hope and instilled fear. Was America ever great for everyone? Will Trump restore greatness for all Americans (inclusive interpretation of MAGA) or only for white Christian males (exclusive interpretation)?

In the inclusive interpretation, many on the Right argue that 'Make America Great Again' means 'Make America Great Again *for all Americans*'. All Americans, they argue, will benefit from Trump's plan. Those who make this argument also tend to say that 'Black Lives Matter' is divisive and 'All Lives Matter' is inclusive. In contrast to the inclusive interpretation, others argue that MAGA is exclusive. They cite Trump's racist rhetoric and policies as Exhibit A in the argument that MAGA will mainly benefit *white Christian males*. These people view 'Black Lives Matter' as inclusive since it demands equal treatment for minorities. Although 'All Lives Matter' might sound like a confession of equality, they argue that it deliberately obscures inequality and injustice in America's past and

present.

Those arguing for the inclusive or exclusive interpretations of MAGA both appeal to American history. However, they remember and forget different aspects of the past. This book explores the landscape of historical memory by looking at Protestant reactions to Trump's MAGA message. It focuses, in particular, on how Americans remember or forget a long history of violence, slavery, land theft and second class citizenship for women and minorities. Although my research focused on Protestants, similar patterns of forgetful remembrance exist among Catholics and likely among the wider population—religious or irreligious. Protestant Christians tend to approach the past in one of three ways: Make America Great Again, Make America Lament, and Make America Better.

Make America Great Again Protestants focus on the good in American history and try to restore the nation to what made it great in past ages. In contrast, *Make America Lament* Protestants want the nation to confront historic evils so that Americans can combat injustice and inequality in the present. A third group moves beyond the Make America Lament position. *Make America Better Protestants* lament history and work for justice, but they also articulate a tempered and qualified appreciation for the flawed figures, ideals and documents of the past.

As will be illustrated, the difference between the *Make America Great Again* and *Make America Lament* positions appears in their attitudes towards monuments. At a basic level, controversy surrounds who and what should be publicly commemorated. For example, is someone who owned another human being worthy of any honour at all? However, there is a more foundational concern that undergirds this monumental debate: will the nation resemble what it reveres?

MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN

Protestants who believe in MAGA are burdened by the history of US court cases and amendments that marginalised God and Christian ethics, most notably the 1954 Johnson Amendment, which regulates how religious organisation can speak on politics, and the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* case that legalised abortion. In the wake of *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015), many fear that America's foundational liberty (the First Amendment right to freedom of religion) is buckling under the pressure of novel rights. Restoration of greatness requires remembering what made America great between 1620 and the 1950s. These Protestants believe the Left denigrates the past by running through history with chisel and axe in hot pursuit of unwholesome targets. Attacking the police, burning buildings, toppling statues, and mobs demanding that random persons on the street visibly support 'Black Lives Matter'—the Right interprets all of this as 'far-left fascism' (to quote Trump's Mount Rushmore speech). When MAGA Protestants invoke history, they tend to remember the good. They emphasise the re-

ligious crusade against slavery, not Christian justifications for enslavement. When condemning historical evil, their criticisms come in small doses. However, admiring the individuals, ideas and events that made America great will move Americans towards greatness. By focusing on the negative, Americans will become harsh, judgemental, unforgiving and self-righteous.

These Protestants, generally speaking, want to preserve monuments—even when they commemorate deeply-flawed individuals, events and documents. Behind this stance is the conviction that America will resemble what it reveres. Stated positively, *Make America Great Again* Protestants believe that focusing on the good in the past will move the nation towards goodness. Stated negatively, they tend to worry that denigrating American history will unmoor the nation from what made it a force for good on the domestic and international stage.

MAKE AMERICA LAMENT

Other Protestants believe MAGA is the solvent of progress. They want to make America lament centuries of land theft, slavery, female subordination and oppression. Present inequalities amplify past wrongs—and they cite voter suppression, mass incarceration, police brutality? and gaps in wealth, education or healthcare. The past is not past, and its consequences do not play out in a foreign country. Some of these Protestants seem allergic to speaking fondly about history, as they do not want to short-circuit national repentance. They believe that claiming greatness denies, dismisses or glorifies racism, sexism and exploitation. By revering historical persons who were racist, Americans will overlook present racism. Although they may admire parts of history, they emphasise critique.

Make America Lament Protestants have a similar approach to public commemoration: they believe America will resemble what it reveres. Stated positively, if Americans are critical of injustice and inequality in America's past, they will challenge injustice and inequality in the present. There is a relationship between statues and the status quo. Confronting past wrongs is related to confronting present injustice; downplaying racism in the past allows racism to run unchallenged in the present. Selective nostalgia ignores past racism, sexism, violence and exploitation. America cannot overcome present injustice if it avoids confrontation with its past—and part of this confrontation involves critiquing who and what should be admired in the public sphere.

MAKE AMERICA BETTER

A third group of Protestants want to make America better. They are uncomfortable with unqualified historical praise, but they also eschew excessive critique. They emphasise two Americas: the founding reality was unequal and unjust, but the founding ideal laid the groundwork for justice and equality. America's enduring inequities and the drive for equality flow from the same source. Therefore,

most historical people, institutions or documents should not be totally rejected or wholly embraced. Whereas most *Make America Great Again* Protestants are on the Right, and most *Make America Lament* Protestants are on the Left, *Make America Better* Protestants come from both sides of the political divide. The *Make America Better* position is not a Goldilocks stance between the other two: ‘America is not as bad as one side claims and not as good as claimed by the other’. Rather, it is a critical step beyond lamentation. Having confessed the past, having recognised the ways the past impacts the present, having determined to work towards remedy and conciliation, what now? How does one interact with the history they lament? What parts of history can Americans cherish and take pride in? These Protestants lament history but also add a tempered and qualified appreciation of the past. They argue that the US will be better if Americans vocalise a deep appreciation for their deeply-flawed nation. Further, they argue that critique can be patriotic.

RESISTING ZERO-SUM HISTORY

The ongoing 2020 debates over history might be likened to chancing upon a multi-car accident right after the collision. As you approach, MAGA defenders climb out of their mangled vehicle and start telling their side of history. Black Lives Matter drivers tell a very different narrative. Soon others emerge: the Alt-Right, Proud Boys, Antifa and Anarchist—each picking sides and picking up stones. The police and courts cannot be trusted. They too are involved in the collision. This crash seems to have many victims, and no one owns up to careless driving. The protests over American history are also very different from a sudden collision. After the killing of George Floyd, the protesting of history seemed to burst from nowhere. Anger over history was anything but sudden; the grievances even pre-date the Pilgrims at Plymouth as *The 1619 Project* vigorously argued. Historical inequities barge into the present, directing anger over Floyd’s murder into historical criticism. Floyd’s death and the peaceful protests seems to have convinced many on the Right of systemic racial injustice. However, the riots and looting divided Americans along ideological lines. As a result, the promotion of justice seems to be hindered by a splitting into competing and incompatible camps: America is great; America is evil. How do we end this proxy war in America’s past so that the push for justice and equality can be a bipartisan effort?

Perhaps Americans need to momentarily detach history from politics so that they can be reassembled in a more constructive manner. At the moment, everything seems to be filtered through a winner-takes-all zero-sum contest. Some on the Right think that denigrating the past helps Democrats at the polls—therefore one must defend a glorious history. Others on the Left think that praising the past means compromising on issues of justice—therefore one must unflinchingly critique history.

CONSTRUCTING A SHARED MEMORY

In *Learning from the Germans*, the philosopher Susan Neiman argued that Americans need to come to terms with their racist past. As a first step, she said: ‘The nation must achieve a coherent and widely accepted national narrative’.⁴ Because the *Make America Great Again* and *Make America Lament* positions only emphasise parts of the story, they are unlikely to become the widely accepted narrative. The *Make America Better* position, in my estimation, is the most likely to support ‘a coherent and widely accepted national narrative’.

In *Trump and the Protestant Reaction to Make America Great Again*, I argue that the pursuit of justice is hindered by polarised histories. We need a shared national memory. When Americans think about the past, we need to start recalling similar things. Americans need to confess the past and connect the dots between the past and present. They need to be willing to confess what went wrong *and* what went right in history. Confessing the wrong is particularly important: US history is inseparable from racism, the theft of land and legalised inequity. Racial disparities in the present were not created *ex nihilo*. They have a long history. Confession simply acknowledges that these things happened. Americans also need to become more skilled at connecting the dots between past and present injustice. Many of the liberties modern Americans enjoy stem from its historical institutions, individuals and documents. Also, many of the injustices and inequalities we currently face have deep historical roots. We need to become more skilled at connecting these dots.

I highlight three things obstructing a shared memory. First, many Americans confuse the emancipation of slaves with the desire for racial equality. Historically speaking, most who wanted slavery to end were opposed to racial equality. One could be a committed racist and an abolitionist at the same time. We should not confuse being anti-slavery with being anti-racist. Those who make this mistake are likely to overestimate the freedom attained at emancipation.

The second confusion comes a century later. Many Americans confuse the expansion of Civil Rights with a commitment to racial equality. After emancipation, every attempt (often successful) was made to reduce non-whites to second class citizens. The Civil Rights Movement only partially remedied the situation. Once again, many Americans mistook the expansion of rights with anti-racism—minimising alarming continuities between slavery, the Civil Rights Movement and the present.

These confusions are made worse by a third factor, a century-long memory gap that spans from the death of Lincoln to the Civil Rights Movement. Many white Americans are simply not aware of the big and small ways that individuals, institutions and the government tried to reduce African Americans to their former subjugation. White accounts of this forgotten century tend to write minorities out of the story, sanitise many unflattering elements or weave an optimistic tale out of the tattered

strands of racism. Whites look fondly at the Civil War that secured freedom for enslaved persons. However, many are not well acquainted with the successful efforts to carry on aspects of slavery under other names. As a result, Americans overestimate the progress from the 1860s to the 1960s because they forget many of the details in between.

BRIDGING THE DIVIDE FOR A BETTER AMERICA

The *Make America Better* position holds history in tension. The repulsive aspects of America's past are legion and truly evil, but that is not all there is to the story. They may not be able to say America was ever great, and certainly not for everyone, but they can work to make America better. Those who want to make America better find tools in the past—in the individuals, institutions, events and documents that are riddled with hypocrisy and short-sighted exclusion—and these tools help in the construction of a more just and equal America. Historical criticism is not a sign of disloyalty, but national maturity. A nation has come of age when it can squarely face its past. Perhaps the greatest strength of this position is in how it frames the struggle ahead. Mature nations own the past and rectify wrongs. National self-critique is patriotic. As Susan Neiman argued in *Learning from the Germans*, “Having the will to face your shameful history can become a show of strength.”⁵

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1. Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables*, trans. Julie Rose (New York: Random House, 2008), 265.
 2. Donald Trump & Joe Biden Final Presidential Debate Transcript 2020 (22 Oct. 2020). Rev.com. (Retrieved 18 Nov. 2020).
 3. For a discussion of how the Left and Right both view themselves as on the side of justice and righteousness, see Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (London: Penguin, 2012).
 4. Susan Neiman, *Learning from the Germans: Race and the Memory of Evil* (Macmillan: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019), 84.
 5. Neiman, *Learning from the Germans*, 32. I am indebted to Neiman for pointing out the aforementioned memory gap.

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